

BOOK REVIEWS

household present harmful images of motherhood, as performed by women, further reifying kyriarchal masculinity and treating women as objects rather than agents. Dwayne Avery's "TV's New Dads: Sensitive Fatherhood and the Return of Hegemonic Masculinity" describes how depictions of fatherhood in a sampling of popular TV shows focuses on the protection of children but never progresses to the other aspects of maternal thinking, nurturance and training. In "What's so Funny about Childbirth?: The Projection of Patriarchal Masculinity in Popular Comedic Childbirth Guides," Jeffrey Nall critiques the manner in which so-called humorous childbirth guides for fathers normalize misogyny and biological essentialism, re-inscribe kyriarchal norms, and marginalize women who give birth through a very narrow conception of masculinity. C. Wesley Buerkle struggles with the balance between helping one's pregnant partner/new mother and the male impulse toward control that wrests agency away from women in his essay titled, "Just Along for the Ride?: A Father-to-Be Searching for His Role."

The last essay in the volume, Michael Young's "Becoming Mother's Nature: A Queer Son's Perspective on Mothering in an Era of Ecological Decline" explores the development of maternal characteristics in a queer man through his relationship with his mother and other caregivers from his childhood. Young's essay brings together the myriad themes of *Essential Breakthroughs*, but primarily the need for a feminist lens with which to view men as caregivers and how men can and do engage in meaningful carework. So many of the essays have questions in their titles and leave their readers with questions about men and carework and how male caregivers destabilize the gendered discourse of childcare. The essays and the questions they raise open up new possibilities for transforming carework into a more egalitarian proposition for everyone who wishes to parent as well as confronts the limitations of traditional masculinity and advocates for the expansion of defining masculinity to include carework.

Natal Signs: Cultural Representations of Pregnancy, Birth and Parenting

Nadya Burton, ed.

Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2015

REVIEWED BY AIDAN MOIR

Comprising scholarly contributions alongside creative works and poetry, Nadya Burton's edited volume *Natal Signs: Cultural Representations of Pregnancy*,

Birth and Parenting is a timely collection focusing on both the mediated and lived experiences of pregnancy, labour practices, and parenthood in Western culture. With topics ranging from how Ontario midwives have historically been framed in public discourse through the archetypes of hero and villain to the previously overlooked relationship between artistic practice and fatherhood, *Natal Signs* addresses how shifting representations of pregnancy, birth, and parenting work to challenge and subvert previous hegemonic beliefs pertaining to these life experiences. While pregnancy and labour are elements that once lacked visibility in visual culture, there is recent growth in this aspect of representation. Technological advances and the popularity of self-representation through digital media have altered how pregnancy, childbirth, and parenthood are represented in visual culture, allowing diverse beliefs and images to circulate in both visual culture and public discourse. Collectively the contributions of *Natal Signs* emphasize the critical need to interrogate cultural and social shifts in representation, particularly since, as Burton argues, the imagery and narratives interrogated by the collection help “generate new forms of visibility and possible action” (2).

The media landscape is dominated by highly sensationalized representations of motherhood, a phenomenon critiqued by existing scholarship examining how the discourses of celebrity and consumer-capitalism have transformed maternity into a consumable identity representative of class politics and social citizenship (Clarke 2004; Douglas and Michaels 2004; McRobbie 2006; Podnieks 2012). The final contribution in *Natal Signs*, Betty Ann Martin’s, “Go the Fuck to Sleep Prince George,” acknowledges that the persona of Kate Middleton exemplifies how celebrity motherhood commodifies maternity into a lifestyle brand that consequently idealizes maternity into an unachievable standard. While Kate’s pregnancies were highly documented by the tabloids and brought in an estimated 400 million pounds into the British economy, Martin argues that idealized representations of motherhood also stimulates the emergence of countercultural discourses enabling women to negotiate between unrealistic narratives of self-perfectibility and their lived experience in the everyday practice of identity construction. Through juxtaposing the media treatment of Kate with vernacular texts, such as websites and musical compilations, Martin’s analysis demonstrates how women can subvert dominant maternal discourses produced by celebrity culture, which, in the struggle to gain visibility within the politics of representation, offers the potential resignification of maternal imagery in visual culture.

Despite the prominence of celebrity motherhood in popular culture, Martin’s piece is the lone contribution focusing on this specific area of maternal representation and strategically follows a diverse selection of chapters, such

as Lauren Cruikshank's discussion on the representation of pregnancy in videogames, Natalie Jolly's analysis as to how discourses of femininity have shaped the labour experience, and Susan Hogan, Charley Baker, Shelagh Cornish, and Paula McCloskey's account of the liberating and therapeutic potential of artistic participatory workshops in assisting women into accepting their new identities as mothers. By addressing a variety of topics, *Natal Signs* highlights the cultural politics of (in)visibility that govern practices of signification. Burton critiques the heteronormativity prevalent in imagery and narratives of pregnancy, childbirth, and parenthood, and the volume directly challenges this heteronormative representations by illuminating the tensions and contradictions that shape the signification of these experiences in cultural politics and public discourse. For example, in "Masculine Pregnancy: Butch Lesbians', Trans Men's & Genderqueer Individuals' Experiences," Michelle Walks details the struggles facing genderqueer individuals and butch lesbians when struggling to maintain their masculine identity in a consumer culture that normalizes pregnancy as an inherently feminine experience.

The strength of *Natal Signs* is the way in which Burton's collection seamlessly explores a diverse range of themes that collectively places representation directly within the experiences of everyday life. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's argument that cultural production represents a form of symbolic power, Burton's volume highlights the numerous possibilities embedded within the politics of representation in facilitating dialogue pertaining to pregnancy, childbirth, and parenthood. The breadth of *Natal Signs* illuminates the powerful ways in which image and representation influence the politics of everyday life. *Natal Signs* ultimately argues for the necessity to engage with representations since they inherently political, and it is only through engagement with such imagery can social change materialize in public discourse.

References

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